* The "Plea for the Middle Classes" was the document which led to the foundation of the large groups of "Woodard Schools" which now (1884) include 3 in Sussex (Lancing, Hurst-Pierpoint & Ardingly) 1 in Staffs. (Denstone) 1 in Shropsh. (Ellesmere, dependent on Denstone) 1 in Somersetsh. (Taunton) & 1 I think in Yorkshire. J.G.T.

* a Plea for the Middle Classes Rev. N. Woodard

19

Absolution, its Use and Abuse,

AND

Excommunication, or the Power of the Keys.

TWO SERMONS,

DELIVERED BY THE

REV. ARCHER GURNEY,

ON THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY,
JUNE 27, 1858,

IN THE TEMPORARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH, 17, RUE DE LA MADELEINE, AT PARIS.

OXFORD AND LONDON:
JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.
PARIS: A. AND W. GALIGNANI.
1858.

PRINTED BY MESSRS. PARKER, CORNMARKET, OXFORD.

ADVERTISEMENT.

In publishing these Sermons at the request of some of the leading members of my congregation, and under the influence of the encouragement of certain of my brethren of the clergy, worthier to speak than I, who have been pleased to express their concurrence with the views therein expressed, and their opinion that the circulation of these discourses might answer some useful end, I desire to state that I have taken the liberty to add a few illustrations of the arguments employed, and, in particular, to subjoin one rather weighty addition to the second Sermon, having before my mind the needs not only of my individual congregation, but of the Church of Christ at large. May God prosper the issue to His good end!

June 28, 1858.

SERMON I.

ABSOLUTION, ITS USE AND ABUSE.

St. John xx. 22, 23.

And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained.

The motive which has urged me to select this portion of the Word of God for exposition will be sufficiently apparent to you. A sad and bitter controversy now rages in our Church and country, calculated to disturb the minds of all that Church's children; and at such a juncture a congregation is perhaps justified in looking for some expression of "the faith that is in him" at the hands of their authorized teacher—of him who is bound to "watch for their souls," as he that must "give account," who is the "ambassador for Christ" to them, and to whom is committed the preaching of the Word of God, and the administration of the Sacraments and Ordinances of the Gospel.

In treating then, as I propose to do this morning, of the ordinance of Absolution, its intrinsic lawfulness, its use and its abuse, I mean, contrary to my usual practice, to deliver a written discourse; partly because, in dealing with a question that presents some difficulties to the mind

and whereon controversy rages, it is necessary to be equally guarded and definite, whether in assertion or reprobation; and partly also, because a hearer with the best intentions may understand imperfectly what is said, and retail portions of a sermon after such a fashion as to give an erroneous impression of its general bearings to those who were not present.

Let me then trust, I do not say that the miraculous assistance of God the Holy Spirit may be afforded me in the consideration of this theme, for this the preacher has no right to expect, not at least in the exposition of doctrine, in which he is bound to adhere to the one faith "once delivered to the saints," (and yet I doubt not that a supernatural power ofttimes accompanies the faithful preaching of the Gospel, carrying the word of application home to the conscience of the hearer,)—though, I say, I have no right to look for miraculous assistance in the exposition of the doctrine which is taught by implication in the text I have read to you, yet am I fully justified in praying that He who taught the hearts of His faithful people of old, by the sending to them the light of His Holy Spirit, may at this present time direct and rule our hearts, purging them from all prejudice and unwillingness to receive the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and enabling us to discern that truth in its wholeness and entirety as far as is consistent with our mortal weakness, assigning its just station and degree to each of the articles of our faith, and eschewing party-spirit and partiality, so as to receive the plain teaching of the Word of God and of the undivided Church of Christ our Lord and Saviour.

And here let me again avow at starting, that the question I am about to treat is not free from serious difficulties,

such as may arise from abuse and corruption, also from an altered state of the Church's life and discipline, and, above all, from that tendency to exaggeration inherent in the heart of man; inherent, doubtless, in all *our* hearts and understandings also, which makes it ever easier for us to diverge to the right hand or to the left than to keep to the narrow path of truth—that white footpath of truth which runs athwart the forest-brakes of error.

Truth is one, error is infinite. Again, error, in a certain sense, is apt to be easier of apprehension than truth, for the essence of error is exaggeration, or the dwelling on one exclusive aspect of a fact. Truth is one indeed, but it is complex also; it has ever at least a twofold, I might say a manifold aspect. To master any truth thoroughly, you must discern its separate elements, and also its apparent, not its real opposite, what I would venture to call its counter-pole. Error denies this seeming opposite, or ignores its being altogether; it cannot believe that there are two sides to the shield; and ever, therefore, is it error. Therefore, also, is it easier to receive erroneous and exaggerated teaching than what is orthodox and sound. For instance, take the two counter-truths of authority and private judgment—how far easier to hold either of these separately than to reconcile them. What I may call the Roman line of teaching exalts authority at the expense of private judgment; what I may call the Genevan line of teaching exalts private judgment at the expense of authority. Our own Church professes to unite the twain—recognises the overwhelming weight of the corporate evidence of the Universal Church, and yet maintains that, as far as the individual is concerned, that overwhelming evidence appeals to his conscience and reason; yes, and to

his private judgment also, so that he who uses that private judgment to oppose it to the weight of all authority, must be devoid of judgment altogether, while it is impossible for any man to recognise and receive the teaching of authority save by the exercise of private judgment. Authority propounds, and private judgment alone enables to receive. Now, although this is essentially just and reasonable, and even self-evident when stated, yet it requires a certain effort of the mind to grasp it, and the many will always be predisposed to embrace one absolute principle or another, not to reconcile apparently conflicting truths.

And now to arrive at our more immediate theme. Our first enquiry will be whether or no an authoritative power has been committed to all duly ordained ministers of Christ, not only to declare, but to convey forgiveness of sins to every penitent offender; and, secondly, we shall ask what may be the lawful and what the unlawful exercise of this power assumed to be inherent in the Christian priesthood.

Now first for the primary question, whether or not an authoritative power of loosing from the bonds of sin is committed to the Christian ministry? It is difficult to understand how any who bow to the authority of the Word of God can entertain a doubt on this head; it is perhaps still more difficult to understand how any professing member of the Church of England can question that Church's judgment or her faith in this same matter.

When our Lord spake unto the Apostles, as in the text, "Whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them," or again, "Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven," was He gifting them with a supernatural and extraordinary power to discern the hearts of

men, and so constituting them their judges, so that we may imagine the power bestowed to have ceased with them? Most assuredly not so: for excepting when under the immediate influence of inspiration, as, for instance, when St. Peter pronounced judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, the Apostles were as little able to read hearts as we. St. Paul and St. Barnabas differed so widely respecting the reliability of their companion St. Mark, that they parted asunder; St. Peter and St. Barnabas also were so far from discerning the evil motives which influenced those who came from St. James at Jerusalem, in refusing to eat with the Gentiles, that they "also were carried away with the like dissimulation;" the whole company of the Apostles, when St. Matthias was chosen to fill the place of Judas, confessed themselves unable to decide whether he or Justus were fitter for the office, saying, "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two Thou hast chosen." In fine, they were men "of like passions with ourselves," liable like ourselves to deception; and though they shall "sit on twelve thrones" hereafter, "judging the twelve tribes of Israel," here they exercised the power bestowed on them by no infallible scrutinizing of the heart, but by the simple and most solemn utterance of the words of mercy and Divine forgiveness, words which ministered remission of sins to the hearts of all penitent believers. Therefore wrote St. Paul to the elders or presbyters in the Church of the Galatians, "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted:" whence we learn indisputably that on all who were spiritual the power of absolution and restoration was bestowed.

Here it will be right to add, that the test of communion with God and of acceptance in Christ Jesus in apostolic days, was ever one, and one only; namely, the partaking of the Lord's Body and Blood at the Lord's table. To be excluded from this sacred feast was to have one's sins retained, was to be bound, or put away from communion, declared excommunicate; as the Apostle words it, to be "delivered over unto Satan" for awhile, in order that the soul of the sinner might be awakened to a sense of its exceeding danger, and so be "saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." There cannot be the slightest shadow of doubt that, in the opinion of the whole apostolic Church, the power of the keys was not entrusted to the Apostles only, but to all the ministers of the Word and Gospel, respecting whom the Apostle Paul wrote plainly, "Obey them that have the rule over you."

This is not the place to draw out at full length the Scriptural argument for believing that every duly ordained minister of Christ has bestowed on him the power, inherent in his office, of conveying God's pardon for sin to all penitent sinners. It is to be hoped that none of us here present would be inclined to question this fact, and that therefore I may proceed without delay to enquire into the limits of its application.

Yet one word may be added as to the Church of England's testimony to this great truth. To every man, then, ordained a priest or presbyter within her, these solemn words are spoken by the bishop who ordains him, at the moment of the laying on of hands,—"Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they

are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." This at least settles the question whether in the opinion of the Church of England the powers of binding and loosing conferred by our Lord on His Apostles were confined to them, or are the heritage of all who exercise the Christian priesthood.

Thus far, therefore, there is no room for disputation among those who receive the unvarnished records of the Word of God, or who call themselves members of the English Church.

And now we have arrived at the great practical enquiry, how this power of absolution should, and how it should not, be exercised.

And first it may be premised, or rather you may be reminded, that there are three forms of Absolution to be found in our Prayer-book: the one declaratory, as in the Morning and Evening Prayers, "He pardoneth and absolveth;" the second optative, or by way of wish or prayer, in the Communion Office, "God pardon and deliver you from all your sins;" and the third, the more direct and individual, to be found in the Office for the Sick, "I absolve thee from all thy sins." Now the first thing to be noted is, that the peculiar form of Absolution given makes no difference as to the efficacy of the act. For 800 years, only the two first forms, the declaratory and optative, were known to the Church Catholic. The ancient fathers of the Church, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Athanasius, never said to a sinner, "I absolve thee," but either, "God absolves thee," or else, "May God pardon and absolve thee!" The form of words used therefore is comparatively immaterial. In any and all cases the minister or priest is only the representative of Christ

his Lord, the ordained channel through whom grace is willed to flow, but not the judge of the thoughts of the heart; not the source of grace or pardon, but the channel only. When he speaks in his Master's name, grace is really given, pardon is bestowed; what is done on earth is ratified in heaven: but when he says, "By His authority committed unto me I absolve," he means no more than when he says, "He pardoneth and absolveth," or, "God pardon and absolve thee from all thine offences." It is in every case God who alone discerns the heart, God who alone really pardons, though He is pleased to use the instrumentality of His servant's voice as the medium for conveying that pardon to the soul of the sinner.

And now, dear brethren, having all mastered this primary truth, we shall be equally able to discern the second point, which I commend to your attention; namely, that the three Absolutions in your Prayer-books, the declaratory, the optative, and the direct, are all equal in their essence, considered as means of conveying God's pardon to the souls of men, and differ only as affording more or less of assistance to men's faith, by the solemnity of the expressions used, or the directness of their application; the optative form employed in the Communion Office being, perhaps, more likely to impress the heart and mind than the declaratory in the Morning and Evening Prayers; and again, in the case of sickness or on other extraordinary occasion, the direct and immediate, "I absolve thee," being calculated to afford comfort to the weak and wavering spirit.

In the third place, brethren, let us distinctly note that, in order for the word of absolution to take effect, it is by no means necessary that he who pronounces it should

be acquainted with the sinner's particular transgressions. The essential conditions for pardon or absolution, (not that we may not be pardoned without absolution, but yet God has been pleased to constitute this the great appointed means of conveying the assurance of pardon to the soul,) —I say, the essential conditions for pardon are faith and repentance; faith in the atoning blood of Christ Jesus our Lord, which cleanses from all sin through the instrumentality of His Word and Sacraments; and sincere repentance, such repentance as involves not only sorrow for sin, but a firm resolve, as far as in us lies, to sin no more. Now where these conditions exist, it may be urged that there is already pardon without the intervention of the absolving word: I answer, that as in holy Baptism, whatever the preparations of the heart, the Holy Spirit is not bestowed until the water be outpoured; as in the blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, however earnest be our desires, the Lord does not come to us sacramentally and spiritually until we receive the elements; as in Confirmation and Ordination the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, descends only at the actual laying on of hands, so also, though God can and ofttimes does grant a joyful sense of pardon to the penitent sinner who has confessed his sins to Him in secrecy and silence, yet it is none the less the appointed ordinance of God that the assurance of pardon should be ordinarily conveyed to the penitent through the medium of the absolving word of grace.

The conditions of pardon, I have said, are faith and repentance: to these should be added confession with the lips to God, such as you have all made this morning before the public absolution was pronounced, such as all of you

will make again who remain to celebrate the great feast of the Gospel covenant.

But it will be asked, Does not the Church of England distinctly recognise the possibility of a special confession of sin to the minister of Christ when the conscience is burdened with any weighty matter, and the penitent has not a full assurance of forgiveness? Assuredly, the Church does recognise this possibility, does provide for this need; nay, she further contemplates the possibility of private absolution in such cases: for speaking to the weak and not the strong, to any Christian who cannot quiet his own conscience, not to him who can, she bids the minister of Christ say, "Let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned minister of God's Word, and open his grief, that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice." This, I say, is spoken for the weak brother more particularly, for him who needs special consolation, or else whose faith is too weak and too imperfect to apply to his own soul, as he might do, the public word of absolution. It is a condescendence to the weakness of the flesh, to backwardness of faith; partly, doubtless, rendered more essential because, at the time the rule was given, the Church had to deal with a population which had been subjected throughout the whole course of its life to the necessity of private confession and private absolution.

Liberty was left therefore, and is left still, to individuals who absolutely require it, who seek for this extraordinary mean of grace, to demand private absolution consequent on the confession of some grievous sin or habit of sin; but not involving (God forbid!) any enumeration of

all the details of evil, which must necessarily have a tendency, in my judgment, to defile the mind and heart, and drag them back to evil.

Ghostly counsel and advice, without any formal private absolution, will in such cases usually suffice to enlighten the heart and understanding, and enable the penitent to receive the pardon of God, publicly pronounced in the Church of God, and in the Church's highest office. But if all other means should fail, then may a private absolution come to the aid of a wavering faith and a distressed conscience. And this is, as I believe, the extremest exercise of the ministerial power which Holy Scripture or the Church of England sanction.

So much, then, for the legitimate uses of absolution. And now to speak briefly of its unlawful abuse, and I must even add, what seems to me its desecration.

An opinion, then, appears to have prevailed of late among certain of the members of our Church, which can scarcely, I think, be reprobated with too much decision and distinctness, which opinion I understand to be this, that there is no exercise of absolution possible without a full and particular confession of every sin to the minister of God preceding it; that absolution is necessarily a judicial act; that the public absolutions, therefore, are altogether null and void; that, no matter what their offences have been, penitents who wish to receive the assurance of forgiveness from the lips of the priest, must detail them in all their naked blackness in his hearing. This is what is called auricular confession in the Roman Church. Such is its acknowledged theory there, and such is understood to be its theory among certain members of our Church.

Now, brethren, it will be sufficiently manifest to you,

from all that I have hitherto spoken, that such a theory, in my judgment, and I believe from my conscience in that of the Church of England, and of the Church of the Apostles also, is utterly untenable, yea, is directly contrary to the truth of the Gospel, and calculated to effect the great injury and even destruction of souls.

Who is it really pardons? God, not man. Who is it reads the heart, weighs the guilt, discerns the reality of repentance? God alone. Man can do none of these things. After having heard all that the penitent can tell him, he can only guess at furthest. After all, he has to rest satisfied with external words and signs; he can do no more than hope that the heart is truly prepared for God's pardon. The wisest man of God is fallible, God infallible alone. This is why, in the most heedful and most guarded exercise of private confession and absolution, when there is no detailed exposition of the particulars of sin, defiling speaker and hearer, and familiarizing the mind with evil, there must ever be a certain liability to error, a possible encouragement of the notion that faith and repentance are real on the sinner's part, simply because the word of absolution is privately pronounced over him by the minister of God.

It is obvious, that in the public exercise of this gift of the ministry there is not the same liability to abuse, because no person present can believe that he of necessity is pardoned simply because the words of pardon are spoken in his hearing. Only the believing soul will take them to itself. To many they are as the idle wind that passeth by; to some few they are as the balm of Gilead, the soft and healing dew, cleansing, purifying, and strengthening the soul.

I conclude, then, that while the habitual practice of

private confession and private absolution tends to familiarize the mind with sin, to substitute the conscience of the minister for that of the penitent, to place a barrier in the way of direct communion with God, and finally, as sad experience teaches, to induce a grievous laxity, a carelessness as to whether God be or be not obeyed, the public absolution in the exercise of the ministry is a divinely appointed gift of God, whereby the soul receives assurance of God's love, and fresh force for the conflict with all the powers of evil. Always admitting, that in case of sickness, when the public absolution cannot be received, or when the conscience is burdened with some great and weighty matter, a special confession of sins may precede a special absolution; not an enumeration of all the particulars of evil, but an "opening of grief," "for the quieting of the conscience," and "avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness."

It may be objected, Where is room for the exercise of the power of the keys, if public absolution is held to be the Church's rule? here is loosing indeed, but where is the binding? The afternoon's discourse, as I venture to hope, may supply, with God's assistance, some answer to this question, and further elucidate the true doctrine of the universal Church respecting the exercise of the power of absolution entrusted to the Christian ministry.

Meanwhile, my dear brethren, we have seen, on the testimony of Scripture and of our own Church, that such a power exists; we have noted its lawful, we have discerned also its unlawful uses.

"Stand fast, then, brethren," I would say to you all, "in that liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled with the yoke of bondage."

Finally, though I have striven to speak briefly and plainly, yet I am aware that it is impossible to comprehend so vast a theme within such narrow limits. But I could scarcely refrain from protesting against that strained, unnatural, and, as I am persuaded, most uncatholic theory of interpretation of the character and nature of absolution, the ultimate effect of which could only be, in my judgment, to assimilate our moral condition to that of the vast communion of the West amidst which we dwell. Those who know what is the "moral" and "ascetic" teaching of that Church (so-called), will not, I think, condemn me for raising my single voice against the introduction of a system which, as I firmly believe, would in the end prove fatal to the first principles of right amongst us, and strike a death-blow at purity of conscience and simplicity of faith in God.

But let not this conviction hurry us, as it too easily might do, into a denial of any article of "the faith once delivered to the saints," or inspire us with a disposition to explain away the emphatic testimonies of the Word of God. Let us ourselves receive the absolving word publicly in the congregation with faith and reverence, and recognise in Christ's ministers, not masters indeed, but "helpers of our faith," to whom certain spiritual and divine powers have been assigned for "the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ."

And so may we "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called, with all lowliness, and meekness, and longsuffering, forbearing one another in love," and "endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

SERMON II.

EXCOMMUNICATION, OR THE POWER OF THE KEYS.

1 Cor. v. 3—5.

For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

We considered, brethren, this morning the nature of the power entrusted to the Christian ministry, whereby they have authority to convey God's pardon of sin to all penitent offenders. We have seen that it is by no means essential to the exercise of the power that the individual sins of the sinner should be made known to the minister of Christ, any more than it is essential for the light of day to have conscious knowledge of the shadows it disperses or the blessings it bestows. God's knowledge suffices. The priest is but the spokesman of his Master. We can easily understand how absolving grace should therefore be quite as freely bestowed by a public as by a private act of absolution, the only conditions for the reception of the blessing being faith and repentance, involving also confession with the lips, not necessarily of individual sins, but of sin before God. Is it essential to stir up the cloaca of the human

heart before the grace of God absorbs them? We know that our gracious Lord and Saviour, in all His dealings with sinners recorded in His blessed Gospel, never once demanded, or encouraged, or permitted even, a special recapitulation of offences, but when He beheld the evidences of faith and repentance in the kneeling form and the uplifted eye, at once exercised His "power to forgive sins" even "upon earth," saying, "Thy sins be forgiven thee; Go in peace!" We have seen that private confession, in the sense of an exact recapitulation of all the particulars of evil, is rather discouraged than anywhere commended in the Word of God, or by our own communion; although those, whose consciences are burdened with any weighty matter, may claim the right of a hearing at the hands of a minister of God if seeking for ghostly counsel and advice, and may even have the consolation of private absolution accorded to them in certain extraordinary cases, as a condescension to human weakness and a help to slowness of faith.

But the question will recur, or may be apt to recur,—If public Absolution be thus the rule of the Church, and private only the exception, what occasion is given to the ministers of Christ to exercise the full power of the keys? They may loose indeed, but how are they to bind? Our blessed Lord did not only say, that "whatsoever they should loose on earth should be loosed in heaven," but He declared also, that "whatsoever they should bind on earth should be bound in heaven." How, it may be asked, do you, the clergy or spiritual rulers of the English Church, exercise this portion of the work of your ministry?

The text, I think, my brethren, and the circumstances connected with that text, may perhaps assist some of you to

a more perfect understanding of this matter—what it is to bind, and when it becomes the duty of the Christian ministry to exercise the power of binding.

Remark, then, that a certain individual member of the Church at Corinth had given grievous offence and scandal to the community. He had taken his mother-in-law, after his father's death, as it should seem, to be his wife, an union not permitted even by the heathen law of the country, and the Church at Corinth had apparently sanctioned this grievous offence, for it still acknowledged the offender as a brother, and admitted him to a share in the highest privileges of grace. For this carelessness or laxity the Apostle severely rebukes the whole community, saying, "Ye are puffed up," exalted, that is, in your own esteem, "and have not rather mourned," in order "that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you;" that is, have not proceeded with due and mournful solemnity to exclude this offender from your fellowship. And then the Apostle proceeds straightway to give express directions for the excommunication or putting away from communion of this offending person, which he calls nothing less than a delivery unto Satan, only for good and corrective purposes, "for the destruction of the flesh," or fleshly will, "that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus," might be conformed unto His Gospel-law.

Looking onward to the second chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, we find the sequel of this history recorded. We learn that the excommunicate person remained for a period of some months at the least under the ban of separation, of exclusion from the means of grace, and that he had been thereby brought to a state of

contrition and sincere purpose of amendment; for this is manifestly implied in what is written by the Apostle, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many," or by the will or sentence of many: "So that, contrariwise, ye ought now rather to forgive him and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up of overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love towards him." And thus was he restored to communion "by them that were spiritual" in that Church.

Now here, brethren, was an undoubted twofold exercise of the power of the keys without any private confession preceding it, first for exclusion, then for restoration. The offence was open, it was a public scandal; the excommunication was open and public too, so also was the restoration, and, beyond a doubt, the absolution which conferred it. "Ye, which are spiritual, restore such an one."—"Let him call for the elders of the Church." (St. James v. 14.)

I reminded you this morning that with the apostolic Christians the one essential mark of Christian fellowship was "the partaking of the table of the Lord." In truth, Holy Communion constituted the only recognised office of the Church in those days. The main purpose for which the faithful assembled together was not to listen to preaching or to join in prayer, though these formed a part of the authorized public worship of the Church, but primarily "to break bread," to "shew forth the Lord's death till He came." To be excluded from this was, therefore, to be denied all Christian fellowship. It was not possible in the apostolic day, as it is, alas! in ours, for a man to esteem himself a Christian, and yet not be a partaker of the Body and Blood of Christ. To be put away from

Communion was plainly to be given up for the time being to the power and domination of the great adversary, as we find it expressly asserted and illustrated again in the 19th and 20th verses of the first chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, where, speaking of those early Antinomian heretics, Hymenæus and Alexander, the Apostle says that "he had delivered them unto Satan, that they might learn not to blaspheme."

Now is such an exercise of the power of the keys, is such a binding as this, possible among ourselves? Assuredly it is, brethren; but it must be frankly added, that it is not often called for. And why not called for? Because open and notorious offenders, such as the incestuous person at Corinth, or as Hymenæus and Alexander, that is, confirmed heretics and revilers of sacred things, drunkards, persons living in the commission of wilful sin, or indulging in notoriously evil habits, take for the more part the painful task of punishment out of the hands of the Christian ministry, and excommunicate themselves! Often, doubtless, with little thought of what they do; little knowledge even that they are "delivering themselves over unto Satan," (might ignorance extenuate the sin!); that they are resigning themselves deliberately to the domination of evil; that they are sealing, as far as in them lies, their own exclusion from the covenant of grace.

It is rarely, however, that a notorious offender, a person living in open and unrepented sin of any kind, presents himself as a guest at the marriage-supper of the Gospel. If he do, we are not only authorized, but bound to repel him. We may possibly expose ourselves to legal penalties in so doing, but this consideration would not weigh very heavily with an upright man, who felt that a plain duty

lay before him. We could not allow the Lord's table to be desecrated knowingly; we could not afford that just ground of offence to all true Christian communicants, that they would have, if one who was called "a brother" (1 Cor. v. 11) were admitted to the feast of charity whilst known to be living in the commission of any mortal sin. And this would seem to be the meaning of the Apostle's words, in this same chapter from which our text is taken, that we are not to "company," or to "eat," nor to partake, as I understand it, of the feast of Holy Communion, with fornicators, idolaters, or drunkards, or extortioners. Such offenders it is the Church's office so far to "judge," as the text expresses it, as to put away from Communion; not, therefore, necessarily forbidding them to listen to all preaching, for how otherwise should they repent and amend? not necessarily excluding from our society in temporal things, for then, as the Apostle says, "we must needs go out of the world;" but excommunicating, that is, banishing from the table of the Lord.

Now I say that there is comparatively little occasion for "them that are spiritual" to exercise this binding power among ourselves—this power, whereby sinners, being placed out of a state of communion with God and His people, necessarily have their sins bound unto them, and are themselves bound or chained by their offences, having no share in that Christian liberty "wherewith Christ hath made us free." To afford many occasions for the exercise of this power, it would first be necessary that the hearts and souls of the great body of the baptized should be endowed with a deep conviction, that as long as they were not communicants, after having attained to the fitting age, they must account them-

selves to be "delivered over to the power of Satan." Were this conviction general, there would probably be very many unworthy candidates for Communion who would need to be repelled until they had given some manifest testimony of repentance. As it is, such occasions may and do arise but rarely. I have known instances, however, repeated instances, of direct refusal of Communion on the part of others; nay, I have myself refused it. We of the English Church have even had our martyrs "to bonds and imprisonment," if not "unto death," for the preservation of the sanctity of the Christian altar, that nothing wicked or impure should approach thereunto: witness the case of that holy man of God, Bishop Wilson, of Sodor and Man, who, for open and notorious offences, refused Communion to the wedded wife of the governor or virtual sovereign of the Island of Man, and suffered grievous persecution consequently.

But such cases are rare, I repeat, among ourselves. The careless, the ungodly, the wilful sinner, excommunicate themselves. A wholesome dread prevails of "eating the Flesh of the Son of Man and drinking His Blood unworthily," and to the sinner's condemnation; often a superstitious and exaggerated dread, but still at least a bar against careless profanation.

A stricter discipline could only be founded, as has been said, on a general sense of the necessity for Communion. This is indeed most devoutly to be wished and prayed for; but, meanwhile, our present practice, lax as it may be thought, appears to me, I do not hesitate to say, far preferable to that of the great Latin Communion, so often held up as a model in matters of discipline by the ignorant. We at least cast the weight of responsibility on

the consciences of our people: we tell them of their bounden, their essential duty; we assure them that "except they eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, they have no life in them;" and we set before them plainly the necessary conditions of acceptance, faith and true repentance, involving the sincere resolve to sin no more. We invite them lovingly, we urge them instantly, to draw nigh. If they refuse, the sin is haply theirs, not ours, and we can scarcely be held responsible for it.

And now, what does the Latin, or Roman Church? I do not desire to speak of the sins of a foreign communion; it is not my usual practice to dilate on these, lest I should sin against charity, and widen the existing breach; but there are some occasions on which it is a paramount duty to "speak the whole truth," ever, I trust, "in love,"—to say, "Let God be true and every man a liar." What, then, does the Roman Church in this matter? First, she makes Communion once a year imperative; then, she insists on private confession previous to reception; but it must be added, her chief labour is expended to facilitate approach. She has decided,—grievous to relate, but too true,—that attrition, without contrition, is sufficient for pardon; that is, in plain words, that mere sorrow for sin shall be accepted without the resolve and promise of amendment. More than this; it is a melancholy but undoubted fact, which the simplest Roman catechism will establish, that she palliates and makes excuses for, virtually defends, most grave offences, classing them among mere venial sins which need not even be confessed. Under the influence of a misguided charity, to take the mildest view, she becomes a very party to the sin of the sinner.

And why does she all this? She desires to keep a

communicant population within her fold, and to attain this end she widens her stakes, nay, she herself "pulls down the hedge" of right and duty. She sanctions falsehood and prevarication; she even furnishes a tariff for venial theft. Thus does the Church of God herself "put darkness for light," and "bitter for sweet;" thus does she tamper with fundamental right, and truth, and justice, with all that is not hers to give away. Thus, like the hot noontide sunshine of the South falling upon some wide waste of corruption and decay, instead of purifying, does she draw forth all the poisonous fog vapours of the marsh, and fills the air with pestilence and death. Think how terrible, brethren, that the Church of God, rather than run the risk of driving the sinner to despair, should abet, should palliate, should defend his sin? Almost incredible, yet too certain; for all this is plain fact, no exaggeration. I repeat with pain and grief, what I dare not veil beneath some decent euphuism, the Roman Church, lest she should drive the wilful sinner to rebellion, becomes too often a party to his sin, accepts him with and in it.

I state this with deep regret. I am willing to acknowledge many excellencies in the Roman Church; but that Jesuit system, which her most faithful children, a Pascal among the number, have repudiated with such horror in time past, has now become her formal, her authoritative teaching.

And what is the consequence? Worse than laxity; a too melancholy disregard of the first principles of truth and right (think of Italy as it is!), a rending asunder of the sacred ties of trust and confidence which bind man to man, moral and social disorganization, and religious infidelity. Grant that the rulers and governors of this great Church

have been influenced by the strong desire to save the souls of men alive, as I will not doubt,—they, and no man, have the right to do this at the expense of God's justice and essential truth. Events are in God's hands. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Does He need the aid of our sin to accomplish His designs? Shall we advance His cause by acts of fealty to the adversary? Far, far better were it that the worldly, the careless, the profane, should condemn and exclude themselves, than that the Church should sanction or palliate evil to keep the masses in her visible communion, should tamper with eternal right and justice that her ranks may be full, that she may count her millions and her tens of millions, and "sit a queen in pride."

Such is the discipline of the Latin Church, if you account it worthy of the name. Will any prefer it to our lack of discipline?

And thus, brethren, I have striven to indicate wherein consists the power of the keys, and to shew that this power still exists, and is at times employed among ourselves. And I have maintained also the intrinsic superiority of our working system in this matter over that of the Roman Church. But I must not be understood to hold that the practice of the Church of England is perfect, or that it is not to be desired that a stricter discipline should be restored to her. Nay, I trust to live, if God so will, to see the day when all the self-excommunicate, that is, all who are living as professed members of the Church of England, without waiting on their Lord in His highest ordinance, may be publicly and solemnly declared to be self-excommunicate, at least three times in the year. Meanwhile, it is not, I think, the duty of the simple-

minded Christian to sit in judgment, as it were, on the errors or shortcomings of his own communion more than he can possibly avoid. He is bound, I must maintain, to consider the good rather than the evil. Our existing system affords little encouragement to hypocrisy or self-deceit, it casts the weight of responsibility upon the penitent, it never attempts to substitute the conscience of another for that of the individual most concerned. It errs solely by omission, if at all.

"Stand fast, therefore," I must say once again, "in that liberty wherewith Christ has made you free, and be not entangled with this yoke of bondage!" Look upward and look onward rather to Christ your Lord and Master, the Church's Sovereign Head! Despise not indeed the channels of salvation which God the Lord has provided for your need, but "be not ye the servants of men!" God is your judge. "Cast your cares on Him, for He careth for you."

His ministers indeed are charged to pronounce His pardon of sins to all penitent offenders, and when this work of the priesthood is performed by them in the public prayers or at the administration of the Supper of the Lord, then prepare your hearts, and believe, when you hear those sacred words, that God's pardon is sealed in heaven also. And if, while living in carelessness and sin, you should be for awhile restrained by ministerial authority from approaching the table of the Lord, bear that privation meekly, and "submit yourselves as to them that must give account." But this latter exercise of discipline is exceptional: ordinarily the ministers of Christ will cast the weight of responsibility upon yourselves, so affording perhaps only the less room for self-deception on your part.

Finally, brethren, "bear we one another's burdens" in all sympathy and kindness, and so may we "fulfil the law of Christ!" Be not ashamed, any of you, to consult those who fill the office of the ministry, if you believe they can in any wise assist you. They on their part are absolutely bound to come to your assistance when required. But forget not also that the Apostle writes, "Every man must prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." Forget not that "every man must bear his own burden," must "answer for himself unto God." The Church is indeed the depository of divine grace, the ministry is appointed for the edification of the saints, but the soul must look by faith on and up to its crucified and glorified Lord, must wash by faith in the ever open fountain of atonement, must hold direct, immediate communion with Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Rest therefore in no secondary means. Frequent lapses there may be doubtless in the most earnest life; constant need for the absolving words of grace there will be; but yet the natural and normal state of the Christian soul is that of conscious acceptance in and through the merits of its Heavenly Master, of "peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

God grant, therefore, that, avoiding all heretical self-confidence on the one hand, and all idolatry of the creature or secondary means of grace upon the other, we may never more be "as children carried about with every" or with any "wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby" some "may lie in wait to deceive," or else by those errors of overweening love and good intention which may be so far more difficult to resist. When the decoy bird sings most sweetly and lovingly,

the net is nearest. "Surely that net is spread in vain in the sight of any bird." When the grass is greenest, when the blossoms are most rich and beautiful, the marsh is most treacherous also. No falsehoods are apt to be so dangerous as those that are interwoven with truths, from which they may seem naturally to spring, as though the branches of the poisonous berry were intertwined with those of the healthful cherry-tree, springing apparently from one stem. And when dangerous corruptions of vital truths are propounded by the voices of those we revere, themselves erring from an unconscious exaggeration, and out of anxiety to save the sinner's soul alive, we cannot but feel that the danger of deception is imminent, and it cannot be an unchristian office to raise a warning voice in love and fear. Never has Satan succeeded in injuring the Church by open warfare; only by "disguising himself as an angel of light," on the plea of extraordinary reverence unduly exalting the creature, under the cover of intense self-denial reprobating the lawful use of God's fair world. Our brethren, doubtless, have erred from love for the sinner's soul; they have entered on a downward path unconsciously, and know not the precipice which lies before them. Not that this is said in judgment of any individual, God forbid! only in reprobation of the opinion that private confession is necessary to absolution, and that that confession must involve a detailed enumeration of offences. Hold we fast, brethren, and may they who have been suffered to err in this matter themselves admit, (nay, may I interpret their present theory erroneously, may they even now already hold,) that the public absolution conveys God's pardon as freely as a private absolution could do, and that confession involves

the cry of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner," not necessarily a detailed catalogue of separate offences! And so may we all come, we and they, and even the children of another Church, if God so will, "in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ!" Amen and Amen.